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XX.—GOETHE'S POEM "*IM ERNSTEN BEINHAUS*"

The original manuscript of this poem is preserved in Hanover, and over it is written, in Goethe's hand: "For the 17th of September, 1826." This date Goethe crossed out, writing in its place: "September 25, 1826." It was printed during his lifetime, without title, at the end of *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, published in 1829, and is followed by the words in parenthesis, "Ist fortzusetzen." Only after Goethe's death, in the Cotta edition of 1833, appears the usual title, "Bei Betrachtung von Schillers Schädel," doubtless added by Eckermann. Nearly all texts, with the notable exception of the Weimar edition, repeat this title. The Jubilee edition has the heading, "Schillers Reliquien."

On Schiller's death in 1805, his remains were deposited in a moderate-sized vault, the "Kassengewölbe" in the graveyard of the Jakobskirche in Weimar, and remained there more than twenty years; in March, 1826, the structure was torn down, at which time most of the coffins in the vault had fallen to pieces, and Schiller's bones were sorted out with some difficulty. September 17, 1826 (the first date written by Goethe over the poem) the skull was placed in the pedestal of Dannecker's Schiller-bust in the Ducal library, with formal ceremonies, which Goethe felt unable to attend. We have a circumstantial diary of Goethe's for the year 1826, but nowhere is there the slightest hint that he took any personal part in the removal of his friend's remains—a task from which he certainly would have shrunk. As to Goethe's amendment of the poem, it corresponds precisely with entries in his diary:

Sept. 25: Nachts Terzinen; Sept. 26: Die Terzinen abgeschrieben. . . . weitere Betrachtung der Terzinen.

The present poem, and the soliloquy near the beginning of the second part of *Faust*, constitute Goethe's only published attempts in *terza rima*. On May 6, 1827, Eckermann remarked that the Terzinen in *Faust* seemed to have their origin in Goethe's impressions received in the neighborhood of Lake Lucerne, to which Goethe replied: "I will not deny that these contemplations come from that region; in fact, without the fresh impressions (*frische Eindrücke*) of that marvelous natural scenery, I should never have been able to imagine the content of those verses."

Of course the word *frisch* can mean "vivid" as well as "recent," but Hermann Henkel¹ assumes that Goethe must mean "recent," and tries to prove that *Faust's* soliloquy was written in February, 1798—citing Goethe's correspondence with Schiller during that month, which will be presently considered. Calvin Thomas followed Henkel, but Pniower contends rightly that the language of *Faust's* monologue shows the style of the aged Goethe, and maintains that the poet got the chief hint of this scene (the rainbow against the waterfall) not from Lake Lucerne, where he saw no waterfalls, but from *Childe Harold*, which did not appear until 1818.

The meaning of our poem is sufficiently obvious: In the gloomy charnel-house the poet sees skull after skull in ordered rows, and bethinks himself of the hoary days of antiquity. Here lie, tamely strewn about, the massive bones of those who, of old, slew one another; there is no rest for them, even in the grave. These sorry relics of humanity are repulsive, but a glance at one splendid skull

¹ *Schnorrs Archiv*, 8. 164.

brings inspiration: taking it in his hand, the poet goes out into the free air, where he is refreshed by the thought that Nature, in its profusion of resources, has impressed signs of Divinity upon the form of man during Evolution's infinite ascent, by developing his noble organ of thought—nothing about Schiller, no word hinting at local relation to Weimar.

Professor Charles Harris comments: "Goethe represents himself as standing in the vault of the church in the midst of the skeletons of the unknown dead, when he beheld the skull whose noble proportions called forth his glowing eulogy." Schiller was not buried in a church; the detached vault, well shown in Bode's *Damals in Weimar*, is plainly an eighteenth-century structure, not going back to "hoary days of yore," but built to receive the remains of conventional Weimar citizens at the time, of all others, when Europe, still under the centralizing influence of Louis XIV, was farthest removed from the rough self-help of wild anarchistic medieval times.

Moreover, the poem has to do with a *Beinhaus*, an institution not in vogue in Weimar in Goethe's time, although continued, with all its grewsomeness, to our own days in Switzerland. In that country the digging of graves in rocky soil is very difficult, and after some ten years the occupant is required to make way for a new tenant. Connected with the graveyard is a small structure in which the larger bones are placed below, while the skulls, their names neatly painted across their foreheads, are shelved in close rows. Such charnel-houses I have visited in the Tell-region, notably at Altdorf, and on the Seelisberg, above the Rütli. The latter I entered early on the morning of May 8, 1897, while the entire community was attending service in the nearby church. In order to take a picture of one of the skulls—that of a certain Barbara

Seelen—I removed it from its shelf, put it into a patch of sunshine, photographed it, restored it to its place and went on my way to the Rütli without being noticed by the rude fathers of the hamlet, who, with much reasonableness, might have rolled me off the steep cliff for the sacrilege.

I am convinced that the inspiration for this poem came to Goethe during one of his three Swiss journeys. In 1775 he visited all the Tell-scenes, and was much interested in them. On June 26, 1775, he attended a session of the Physikalische Gesellschaft in Zürich, where Lavater read a treatise on the significance of the formation of the human skull. More suggestive is his visit to Murten, in northwestern Switzerland, on October 7, 1779. His diary relates: "We came . . . to Murten, rode to the *Beinhaus*, and I took away a bit of the back-skull of one of the Burgundians with me. In Murten we ate luncheon, and read out of a vigorously-written book the history of the Battle of Murten. It is very stirring to hear the deeds of this time recounted by a witness and actual fighter." The "book" was doubtless Veit Weber and Diebold Schilling's *Description of the Burgundian Wars*,² which contains the famous ballad, *Die Schlacht bei Murten*. In this is the significant stanza:

Der hatte selbst die Hand am Schwert
 Der diesen Reim gemacht;
 Bis Abends mäh't er mit dem Schwert,
 Des Nachts sang er die Schlacht.

It made a deep and lasting impression on Goethe. I believe that I am the only person who has pointed out the fact that Goethe's spirited account of the battle of Gravelingen (in *Edgmont*) derives some of its most forcible touches from this ballad. One need only compare the

²Third ed., Bern, 1743, p. 347.

words in *Egmont*: "im Fluss zusammengehauen, weggeschossen wie die Enten. Was nun durchbrach, schlugen euch auf der Flucht die Bauernweiber mit Hacken und Mistgabeln tot" and the original lines:

Viel sprangen in die See hinein
Und düsteten doch nicht.

Sie schwammen wie der Enten Schaar
Im Wasser hin und her;
Als wär es wilder Enten Schaar,
Schoss man sie im Geröhr.

Auf Schiffen fuhr man in den See,
Schlug sie mit Rudern tot, . . .

When the ballad was reprinted in *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, Goethe, after pointing out its realism, called attention to the fact that it had probably been modernized, which a comparison with the best edition of the *Beschreibung* confirms—this was twenty-seven years after his first acquaintance with the book.

Repeated instances can be given of Goethe's interest in the Swiss, from the exact standpoint taken in our poem, namely that of admiration for their valor in medieval days. His last Swiss tour, in 1797, served potently to revive the impressions of the previous visits. Thus, he writes from Stäfa on Sept. 25 and Oct. 14, 1797: "I have once more turned up splendid material for idyls and elegies, whatever names one may give to kindred sorts of verse, and have already realized somewhat on them. . . . I have recalled the effect which these objects made upon me twenty years ago; the general impression has remained, the details have disappeared; I feel a strange yearning to renew and rectify my earlier experiences." He also comments on the ancient glass windows in Bülach: "In the vigorous poses of the men-in-armor . . . one sees

the sturdy spirit of their times, how strong these artists were, how doughty and democratically-aristocratic in their conception of their contemporaries." He admires the paintings at Stanz, which give the chief events from the Swiss Chronicles, and reads with interest a local history of the state of Unterwalden. He revisits all the Tell-scenes, and is very busy with Tschudi's *History*, in order to recall the days of old for an epic on Tell. He informs Schiller that he is deeply concerned with "studying, as closely as possible, the characters, customs, and ways of the people."

On his return to Weimar, at the end of October, 1797, all these impressions were vigorously at work. On February 21, 1798, he writes to Schiller: "Pray tell me your ideas as to the metrical form of Schlegel's *Prometheus* [a long poem in *terza rima*]. I have something on hand which incites me to write *ottava rima*, but inasmuch as this form is far too constrained and regularly recurrent, I have thought of *terza rima*—but on closer observation it fails to please me, because it never rests, and on account of its marching rhymes, one can never bring it to an end."

I hold that Goethe is working here upon our poem: his words, "weil man wegen der fortschreitenden Reime nirgends schliessen kann," correspond very well with the closing parenthesis, "Ist fortzusetzen." Schiller answered that the meter did not please him, as it went on and on, like a monotonous hand-organ, "and because an exalted mood seems to be inseparable from it." On February 26, 1798, von Knebel sent Goethe a *lusus naturae* in the form of a hare's skull, for which Goethe was especially grateful, and sent him some specimens from the St. Gotthard in return. This month of February, 1798, coincides with the height of general philosophic and scientific discussions between Goethe and Schiller, on themes very closely related to the content of our poem.

There can be no doubt that the removal of Schiller's skull on September 17, 1826, gave Goethe a suggestion for completing the poem. What more natural, than that, in these days of acute suffering in recalling the loss of his dearest friend, Goethe should take up the poem connected with their most intimate labors and discussions, as a tribute to his associate? It is, however, in no wise a realistic reference (as is generally assumed), but forms a symbolistic tribute, stated in terms of experiences long past, but vividly recalled by a close association of ideas.

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